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ABSTRACT

An exploration of writing anxiety suggests that it is a normal form of behavior rather than a pathology, but that it varies in degrees of its dysfunctionality. Excerpts from the log books of college students in a writing anxiety workshop illustrate four broad categories of writing anxiety: procrastination, feeling emotionally distressed, thinking about one's inadequacies, and feeling physically uncomfortable or distressed. In the writing anxiety workshop, students verbalize their writing problems; receive individual analyses of their problems, along with suggestions for change; and share the results of their attempts to follow the suggestions. The log book excerpts may be interpreted within the rational-emotive theory of Albert Ellis, as well as within a variety of other theories of psychopathology. However, writing anxiety is distinctive from other forms of pathological anxiety in that it is highly situation-specific, seems to be self-limiting, is relatively visible, and--most importantly--appears to be relatively easily overcome by rational instruction, with some mild-to-moderate confrontation in two or three brief group sessions. Thus, writing anxiety appears to be at best a very weak form of pathology; and in fact some anxiety is a necessary ingredient in the writing process, operating as an energizer. (GT)

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ANXIOUS WRITERS: DISTINGUISHING ANXIETY FROM PATHOLOGY*

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The purpose of this paper is to explore an important assumption underlying some of the research in writing anxiety (Bloom, 1979; Daly and Miller, 1975): that writing anxiety is a normal form of behavior, rather than a pathology, but that it varies in degree of its dysfunctionality. If it is more properly viewed as normal though dysfunctional behavior, then teachers of writing (and others) are the appropriate people to help students in overcoming this problem. But if writing anxiety fits more closely with specimens of pathological behavior, then other professions are probably better able to aid students.

Let's begin this exploration by looking at some excerpts from the log books of students voluntarily enrolled in a writing anxiety workshop (see Bloom, 1979). These excerpts describe the students' feelings, thoughts, and behaviors in regard to their writing.

1) (with regard to procrastination): "I just don't get down to work; I distract myself with other things. I get up and do the laundry. I talk to kids on the corridor. Then I get hungry and have to get something to eat."

2) (with regard to feelings about writing): "I was only hoping that my writing didn't look ridiculously infantile as compared to the other class essays (in freshman English)."

3) (with regard to thoughts about writing): "I cannot seem to make myself write a sentence until I am satisfied that it is a perfect sentence. It is stupid, I know, but it seems impossible for me to leave a blank spot, a word undecided on, etc., and come back to it later."

4) (with regard to the writing environment and its effects): "After a while, as I am sitting at my desk, I can feel a headache coming on, or pains in my neck. Sometimes I get a stomach ache."

These quotations are representative of four broad categories we find reoccurring in one form or another among the students who come to writing anxiety workshops: 1) procrastionation, either before or during the act of writing; 2) feeling distressed about the quality of one's writing, about being evaluated, about failing to meet standards; 3) thinking about the inadequacies of one's writing or skills, or the limits of one's knowledge -- always needing more reading notes before beginning -- or recognizing that one's writing does not stand up well in comparison to some model; 4) environmental factors such as being physically uncomfortable in one's writing situation, and becoming physically distressed which impedes writing.

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As described elsewhere (Bloom, 1980), the writing anxiety workshop begins by verbalizing what the students recognize as interfering with their writing. Usually people have little difficulty recognizing some aspects of their own behavior which cause problems, and they empathize with others who describe still other aspects of writing anxiety. It is important that public discussion be held in order that a person hear others describe a wider range of nuances than he or she might be aware of in his/her own writing. People can easily accept or reject the personal relevancy of these public declarations by members of the workshop, but they differ in their willingness to admit attitudes or behaviors which embarrass them. The workshop leader draws out some of the implications of these public remarks but is careful not to create an atmosphere of blame or shame with regard to these admissions. Thus far, everyone who has attended these writing anxiety workshops has felt comfortable enough to describe some aspects of their writing problems.

Later sessions of the workshop involve an individualized analysis of student writings and log books describing their particular experiences encountered during the writing period intervening between meetings of the workshop. A basic part of these individualized responses are the prescriptions for change (Bloom, 1979). For example, for the person who complains of not being able to get started, there may be a suggestion for scheduling time, setting aside fresh periods of the day when the would-be writer is likely to work best; and then some free writing might be recommended to get the mind and muscles exercised in the mode of writing. The session after the individualized analyses are presented involves some general discussion of these approaches and some clarification of how they are to be carried out.

The final session, usually about a month later -- enough time to enable the student to practice these suggestions with assigned papers or other writing tasks--brings the group together again to share how the suggestions worked with regard to their individual problems. Accentuating the positive, the workshop leader asks about successful instances. Some people report obvious changes and others mention changes that are less obvious. Again, these public explanations help to clarify for others that they too may have experienced in their writing, even though they were not aware of it at the time. Remaining problems are discussed, and variations on the suggestions for solving them are again offered, often with an invitation to meet with the workshop leader privately to work through stubborn problems. Evaluation of the workshops (Bloom, 1979) generally indicates a sense of relief and satisfaction, although not all problems have been solved in the course of the brief workshop sessions.

Against this background, I would like to introduce some terms to clarify the discussion of "normal" and "pathological" anxieties, and to consider whether writing anxiety is more like the former or the latter. Anxiety, as a state of uneasiness, is usually viewed as a signal of some stressful situation, known or unknown. How anxieties are viewed depends on one's guiding theory of human behavior.

In a school of social work (where I teach), practice methods classes often introduce specimens of client thoughts, feelings, and actions to illustrate the rich varieties of ways people express their disturbed and disturbing behavior. Let me present one easily describable theory of psychopathology to

illustrate this point. The rational-emotive theory of Albert Ellis (1973) uses a formula as simple as ABC. When some antecedent event (A) is followed by some unpleasant consequence (C), one might make the assumption that A caused C. Not so, argues Ellis. "Instead, emotional consequences are largely created by B--the individual's Belief System. When, therefore, an undesirable Consequence occurs, such as severe anxiety, this can usually be quickly traced to the person's irrational Beliefs, and when these Beliefs are effectively Disputed (at point D), by challenging them rationally, the disturbed Consequences disappear and eventually cease to reoccur." (p. 167).

Given this theoretical statement, let's re-examine the excerpts from the student log books. One student didn't want to look "ridiculously infantile" in comparison to her classmates, while another felt inhibited from writing until he had composed the perfect sentence. Another student distracted himself with other tasks, necessary or contrived, while a fourth student attributed her physical discomfort to her writing situation. In each case, the writing process is the antecedent event and is followed by an unpleasant consequence. But in each case, I suspect that a rational-emotive therapist would identify the irrational belief that is in fact the real culprit causing the distress.

It is unlikely that classmates would ever think of the first student as "ridiculously infantile" -- that is her belief which she inaccurately attributes to them. The student trying to write the perfect sentence is frustrating himself since the concept of perfection is itself an irrational idea, according to Ellis, and that there is anything perfect in writing is a subjective opinion, especially when the class is composed of students who are presumably there to learn to write better. Thus, the irrational belief that "I must write the perfect sentence" appears to fit Ellis' model very closely.

Even the third student who distracted himself with other errands may be interpreted to be using an irrational belief that "the drawer must be orderly --or what will people think of me, that I am a slob ..." in a word, making an irrational belief operate as a distracting force. In the last instance, where physical symptoms are present, Ellis would not deny the psychological reality of these physical pains, but he might be inclined to ask about the irrational belief system that appeared to bind the person in an uncomfortable chair for excessive periods of time instead of making adaptive changes to a more comfortable setting for writing. Is "suffering" a perceived lot of the writer? A just punishment for not being smart enough to finish as quickly as anxious people often believe their classmates do? In brief, most of these apparently stupid statements may be reinterpreted to be psychologically understandable within the rational-emotive perspective. I should add that these same facts might be interpretable within a variety of other theories of psychopathology.

Does this mean that students who come to writing anxiety workshops--and others who do not come but who suffer from the same sorts of thoughts, feelings, and indecisive actions--are "psychological cases"? Are they mentally ill? Is writing anxiety a form of mental pathology? Or is there another more fruitful way of interpreting the facts?

I must admit that as a social psychologist and a professor at a school of social work, I really hadn't given this question about the normality or nonnormality of writing anxiety a great deal of thought until I watched one member of the workshop spend several hours at our home working on an assigned paper. She had called L. Bloom (the writing anxiety workshop leader) near to tears on the first day of spring vacation saying that she had been spending weeks on the assignment with nothing to show and she was self-admitedly "at her wit's end." She had resolved not to go home for vacation until she finished the paper. We invited her to come over and write under our observation. She brought with her a dozen books and numerous notes and pads of paper. It turned out that she had selected one topic, spoken to her instructor who encouraged her to proceed, then she changed to an easier topic but felt frustrated in not being able to do it either. Her physical behavior when writing looked uncomfortable although she had ample room. Her voice still trembled as if she remained near to tears. There were very long pauses between short spurts of writing. After five hours she had produced and scratched out only two paragraphs ...

Disturbed behavior comes in many forms and I am all too aware of the dangers of labeling one specimen of behavior as pathological. However, for that student in this situation, it was clearly a case of almost totally inhibited behavior when, so far as we understood, her thesis was acceptable to her teacher (a kindly, understanding man sympathetic to her writing problems), she had ample evidence with which to use in making her case, and she was an experienced college student (a junior) who knew what was expected of her writing performance. She admitted to a great deal of distress over this situation, in spite of being served supper and supportive words of encouragement.

The story ends more or less happily. She finished the paper several days later and eventually received a grade of A-. It is important to add to this story that in other contexts the student functions well. Her performance in the University is adequate, she carries a full load, holds a responsible part-time job, and has an active social life. How then to account for these different views of the same student?

It is tempting to label this situation as "temporary maddness" but this does not move us closer to an understanding of the dynamics. Rather, it may be more helpful to observe that her writing anxiety appears to be highly situation-specific. It is not a pervasive problem, although writing anxiety could probably appear as one among many problems in a disturbed person.

Except for the time wasted in fruitless efforts, her writing anxiety did not seem to affect any other aspects of her life unduly. However, the longer it continued, the more stress it created. A long period of such frustrations might conceivably lead to choices that influence one's career --like not going into a profession that requires a great deal of writing-- but there is no evidence that I know of that such stress literally drives a person to the point of mental disturbance.

Writing anxiety also seems to be self-limiting. Its victims tend to develop a small range of little tricks and devices that reduce the anxiety or delay it -- like collecting still more notes or reading yet another book. But for the most anxious writing students, the day of judgment does

come and they do finish their writing task, albeit late and probably not as ably as they might have under less stressful conditions.

Another characteristic of writing anxiety is that it is relatively visible. Students can keep logs of their writing experiences and appear able to present almost all of the relevant events, feelings, and thoughts involved. They quickly recognize a teacher's summary statement of their anxiety and can empathize with others presenting their idiosyncratic versions of the same problem. There may be a rigid belief system, like Ellis' postulated irrational beliefs, that causes the consequent discomfort, but it is a belief that appears to be less deeply buried than the perfectionism of the pathologically compulsive or the haunting fear of the paranoid.

A final and most important distinction between writing anxiety and the other forms of pathological anxiety is that those associated with writing problems appear to be relatively easily overcome by rational instruction, with some mild to moderate confrontation in two or three brief group sessions--but nothing like the strong confrontations which rational-emotive therapists use to identify and to refute clients' irrational belief systems. The anxious writer himself or herself can quickly learn to work together with the teacher in identifying and implementing change. Self-control is clearly placed in the mind and hands of the writer where the expectation is that he or she will be able to modify what may be a relatively long-term problem or habits of dealing with the challenge of writing.

Thus, writing anxiety appears to be at best a very weak form of pathology. But there is another perspective which moves it completely into the realm of the normal. This is the view that anxiety is a necessary ingredient in the writing process where it operates as an energizer. A certain amount of energy is needed for a writer to be motivated to work on a task until it is done. Too little anxiety leads to an early dropout from the task in favor of more preferred alternatives. Too much stressful anxiety pushes the carrier away from the painful task toward others which give momentary relief although they may not be preferred in and of themselves.

To return to the four quoted excerpts at the beginning of the paper: One must have a certain amount of perceived pressure to perform a task. Some students wait until the last minute and let that pressure be their motivation. Others find inner motivation for starting to work. But some pressure to begin to work appears to be necessary. What writing anxiety reduction workshops seek to accomplish is to give the freedom of choice to the writer to select the desired amount of pressure, not to escape from it.

Likewise, writers have to have some criteria for the quality of writing against which they can judge their own work. Conventionally, either teachers have provided these over the course of the students' education, or the students have gradually developed their own. Comparisons between some actual writing and some ideal or desired standard must be made in order to advance one's skill. If there were no envisioned goals, then there could be no improvement toward them. Writing anxiety reduction seeks to make these goals open to inspection, more realistic for the stage at which the writer's work is to be performed and judged. By making students acquainted with the range and the subjectivity of judgments about writing, these is hope that students will learn to write to please themselves--as bearers of

appropriate standards including ones on innovativeness--rather than following slavishly the imposed and yet vague criteria of others.

Obviously information must be available on which to write a paper. But there is no way to know exactly when enough information is had on any topic in order to write a paper appropriate for the assignment. It is irrational to believe one can know all that is knowable or all that is written on a topic of any substance, given the archival dimensions of human knowledge on the one hand, and the information explosion on the other. But writing anxiety reduction seeks to supply students with a sense of when reasonable questions have been posed about a writing topic and when reasonable and documented responses have been given, and that the format of presentation is intellectually and aesthetically pleasing. For example, we have used the concept of "diminishing returns" as applied to when a student should stop revising a paper: when the amount of time and effort that goes into revising a given section of the paper does not seem to produce a significant improvement over the previous version of the same section, then the writer should go on to the next portion of the assignment. Though this rule of thumb is quite subjective, students appear to grasp the principle that the writer can have some sense of control over the revision process without becoming frustrated.

The last category of writing anxiety, concerning the various environments that impinge, often negatively, on the writer are largely under one's control. One can work at the library, and within the library in a place where others won't talk and interrupt the writer. The laundry can get done, but not during one's prime study time. The family can be enjoyed, but ways may be found to savor various interactions, and not necessarily in the same room nor during one's writing time. Uncomfortable chairs, poor lighting, drafts --all these can be modified within limits. Granted that accomplishing these environmental tasks may at time be difficult, Ellis would suggest that what is controllable is our beliefs about them, and that by suitable adaptations we can either overcome their unpleasant effects or change them.

Summary

The psychology of psychopathology is a tempting backdrop to a study of writing anxiety which appear to inhibit socially useful activities and create all sorts of personal strains. However, upon consideration of the depth and scope of problems associated with writing anxiety, and the relative ease of its self-control through clear identification of its various manifestations, it seems more fruitful to consider writing anxiety as a kind of energy that can be expressed on a continuum of degrees--too little to too much--with writing anxiety falling in the latter part. With this orientation, the teacher--rather than a pathologist--can help the writer to resolve the problem by appeals to strengths rather than by supports to weaknesses, by encouragements to budget time and to consider favorable responses from teachers at face value rather than to discount them. Moreover, it is important not to remove some of that driving energy since it is needed to accomplish the writing task. In short, limited and focused efforts aimed at the strengths and goals of the writer are the major objectives of this form of educational assistance. Writing anxiety reduction workshops appear able to generate self-awareness to the strengths and limits of normal writing anxiety, and in so doing, make a vital contribution to effective and comfortable writing.

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